



PETER RALSTON

Solitude

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I first set foot on the Maine islands 16 years ago. A graduate student at the time, I was working toward a degree in forestry and I wanted more than anything to go to work somewhere within the vast reaches of the North Maine Woods: the place, I thought, where timber cruising foresters and other real Maine men went. The job market was not encouraging of my fantasy, but on a bulletin board at the forestry school I happened to see a mimeographed notice listing Earth Day-type environmental internships in the Northeast that included one in Maine collecting natural resource data on 12

islands owned by a nature group. Like all truly ignorant people, I had some preconceived ideas about Maine islands because, after all (I thought to myself), I had seen some of them from the peninsulas of Steuben, the small Washington County fishing and blueberry village where I had been living for the two previous years.

Steuben's narrow peninsula roads wandered far down and away from the well-traveled Route 1 — that lifeline that took us either east or west to the big shopping towns of Machias or Ellsworth. My

favorite byway, the north-south trending Pigeon Hill Road, ran down to the tip of Petit Manan Point, which splits Narraguagus and Dyer Bays. Off to the east from Petit Manan, the view encompassed a dozen or so mostly small, spiny, porcupine-like islands crawling down the bay on their way out to sea.

I thought I knew two things about Maine islands when I started to work on them that May of 1975. I knew they were rocky and I knew they were covered with spruce. I also had a third suspi-



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cion that I didn't voice while I was preparing for the field season; namely, if you had seen one of these islands, you had seen them all — or certainly most of what needed to be seen.

I suspect I had gotten the job of surveying the natural resources of the 12 islands I was to visit mostly on the strength of having known a few Washington County fishermen who were willing, in a loose sort of way, to help out with transportation. Eager to get under way with my assignment, I packed my kit for a three-day trip to Flint Island, a 100-acre island at the outer edge of Narraguagus and Pleasant Bays.

I left aboard the lobsterboat JESSE from Pigeon Hill lobster pound, tucked up inside Petit Manan Point, in a dungeon thickness of fog. In those days radar was still a very expensive item for inshore fishing boats, and so we steamed out on a compass course past Dan Leighton Point, north of Pond Island, then four miles across outer Narraguagus Bay headed for Flint — or more precisely, as I was shortly to learn, for the bell buoy near the entrance to the Flint Island Narrows. Not until many years later would it have occurred to me that we were beam-to in a big tide and seaway where two large bays meet the waters of the North Atlantic and where eastern Maine's normal 12- to 14-foot tidal range pushes its relentless way around the islands. Nor did it occur to me that our course, which skirted the shoals north of Pond

Island and Western Reef off Shipstern Island, might have presented any special difficulties.

My lobsterman friend said almost nothing for the first 20 or 25 minutes after leaving the lobster pound. Then he throttled back, cut the engine, and stepped to the stern of the boat — "Listenin' for the bell," he said. But there was only the muzzy, muffled sound of the sea's rote, and after a minute or so he fired the engine back up, steamed another few minutes, shut down, and listened again. He listened hard, as swells slapped at the sides of the JESSE. Slowly I began trying to separate out sounds, all strange, dampened down in the fog, coming from all directions at once, with no horizon to fix on, with no direction known. As the seconds ticked by, I heard nothing faintly resembling a bell. Nothing like, whatever, maybe a gull call careening off somewhere.

"There," my friend said finally. Taking a quick course, before he lost whatever it was he heard, he throttled the JESSE ahead again until we stopped for the third time. By now I, too, could hear the chaotic clap of the bell buoy, as I tried to figure out where the sound was coming from out of the dense fog. Then the lobsterman pointed into the thick white blankness, "There it is." Though I stared straight and hard directly to where he was pointing, I saw nothing. I'm not sure I really believed he saw something, but I kept staring to the place he pointed as he throttled back up. In

another 10 seconds we motored by the clanging bell and three minutes later we steamed into the little anchorage of Flint Island.

I distinctly recall these few thoughts: At first, I was disconcerted that this lobsterman could hear things I couldn't hear and see things I couldn't see. And then slowly it began to occur to me that perhaps there was more out here than met the eye. Soon I was ashore by myself. After pitching a tent, arranging my kit, laying out field guides, botanical keys, binoculars, hand lens, and such, I fell to the task of taking stock of everything around, writing down long lists of names of things I found — *Lathyrus japonica*; *Picea rubra*; *Mertensia maritima*; *Iris hookeri*; *Empetrum nigrum*, and so on. The names rang out over the next few days as I wandered the shores and swales and beaches of this uninhabited island, absorbed in my cataloging.

I was struck by the intricately beautiful pattern of the white cherty cliffs for which Flint was named, and although it took several more months for me to fully realize it, I had landed on an island like no other on the Maine coast.

The interior of Flint, like that of many islands I was to visit that summer, was a dense thicket of tangled young spruce and alder hells, best negotiated on one's hands and knees and completely discouraging to anyone not being paid specifically to transect them. I found in Flint's interior only one entirely arresting feature that was to concern me on and off for most of the rest of the summer. Within the densest interior of this lonely island were stone walls and piles of fieldstone. It wasn't until much later that I was directed to the home of one of the Sawyers in Milbridge, an old man who had tended a flock of sheep on Flint Island as a boy and told me who had lived there and what had become of the people of the island. But on this particular foggy day, I began to realize that this island, like the people around it, held secrets that were not likely to be deciphered by the small library I had brought along.

Amid these few disconcerting thoughts, I spent my allotted three days alone and had acquired a long list of names of what grew on the shores, flew through the trees, and lived in the rocky intertidal zone. On the morning I was to be picked up by my lobsterman friend, I was feeling pleased with myself and was all packed and ready to go, down by the shore. I recall I waited a couple of hours, until the first wisps of doubt crossed my mind that maybe the JESSE wasn't coming back. Although the middle day of my visit had been bright, blue and sunny, the fog had now returned and had probably delayed my lobsterman friend who, I was certain, couldn't have confused the days and wouldn't have forgotten me. By this time I had pretty much eaten everything I had packed

out. Along about mid-afternoon, I had concluded I wouldn't be seeing the JESSE come out of the bleak whiteness off Flint's northwest point, so I repitched the tent, went over my notes, added to my lists, and tried not to think about eating.

The next morning I woke up early, but decided against packing up my gear — I suppose as some kind of propitiation to the events of the past day. I began walking down the flinty, shingly shore over which spiky spruce boughs were combing tiny droplets of water from the wet breath of fog. At such times everything is very close, the view is narrowed to 40 or 50 feet, with little to be seen, and because not much is moving on the water, the air is still, heavy and silent.

At that moment, directly in front of me, not 20 feet above the beach and just off the island edge, navigating by the shore spruce, I was staring at two magnificent bald eagles: one a female, slightly larger than the male. They flew by, wingtip to wingtip, out of the fog — as startled to see me as I them, and then careened sharply away and were gone. I heard, and in the damp air imagined I felt, the rush of heavy air from their wings on my face. Although I'm not sure I knew it then, in that moment my life changed forever. In that experience that lasted an instant, I felt a sensation telescoping itself outward, beyond Flint's outermost realm, into a foggy white light far beyond boat times and lists of names of things I had left at the campsite.

Over the past 16 years, I can think of another small handful of such experiences, which almost always occur alone and accidentally; which strike me dumb at the time, but then work like the tide and fog in strange ways of muffled sound and obscured sight to bring me back and back again to things that cannot be named.

Here in Maine, still within our arms' reach in the late 20th century, we find a multitude of these once lightly inhabited islands, places that are rich in the ways of maritime history and culture. Places that, the smaller and more enclosed they are, the larger the window on the infinite, the farther they telescope to the heavens.

These are spirited and peopled places, and we must consider carefully how to keep these worlds balanced between accessibility and inaccessibility — because in one single moment of solitude, they provide our callous, name-collecting natures something as precious as vision itself.

1991